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Soviet SALT Politics

Weapons systems, military forces and intelligence machinery are the stuff of SALT II. Debate rages over each of these to the bewilderment of the public and the delight of the experts. But there is another dimension to the debate, which is as important as any single detail. The political background of the treaty, within the Soviet Union and in the international arena, must be factored into the eventual decision on ratification, amendment or rejection. Only by including this dimension can its individual details be given their proper weight.

The Soviet Union's political process is certainly different from the American. But different interests and points of view do exist in the Soviet system, and there are procedures for resolution of those differences within the bureaucracy, the party apparatus and the leadership councils. From the record of negotiations of SALT II, it is clear that a number of balancing trade-offs took place in the Soviet negotiating position and in Soviet acceptance of the final version. Hardheaded Soviet insistence on retaining the heavy missile was balanced by Soviet acceptance of equal aggregate force totals, despite earlier arguments that our Europe-based and allied nuclear forces that can strike the U.S.S.R. should be included in the American count. American insistence on counting rules was accepted despite their penalizing some single-warhead Soviet missiles and launchers by counting them as multiples, because their prototype was so tested.

Some Soviet concessions were more apparent than real, such as the agreement to abandon the mobile SS16, which was apparently a dud. But others will require substantial changes in established Soviet practices, such as the destruction of 250 existing Soviet launchers, the limit to one new missile instead of the usual four per generation, the exchange of data on forces and test notifications despite longstanding Soviet paranoia about secrecy, and the restriction of the heavy missile to 10 warheads rather than allowing it to be im-

30 or more. The final text also represents Soviet acceptance of future improvements in America's forces through the MX missile and cruise missiles, the latter compromise balancing American agreement that the Soviet Backfire not be counted, with limitations imposed on each side's weapon.

These Soviet concessions reflect a Soviet political decision that the benefits of SALT II to the U.S.S.R. outweigh them. The primary benefit was the cap it put on the American arms race and the danger that the American sleeping giant might arise and outdistance the Soviets in this technology in the same dramatic way it did in the 1960s space race. Recognition as an essentially equal superpower also represents a long-sought Soviet goal, and SALT II's numerical and qualitative provisions make this plain.

But a sense of the bargaining that occurred among Soviet decision-makers can be seen from the Soviet reaction to President Carter's March 1977 suggestion to "amend" the agreements reached in 1974 at Vladivostok to reduce the Soviet heavy-missile force from 300 to 150 launchers. The reaction was sharp and harsh, showing that the 1974 trade-offs were viewed as firm rocks in the negotiated balance, not subject to later rearrangement. Americans blithely contemplating similar amendments now should recall the criticism of the naiveté and brashness of the American diplomacy in that instance.

The final text of SALT II reflects these compromises made within the Soviet government, just as it reflects the compromises made within the U.S. government. The treaty before the Senate thus does not satisfy every Soviet interest, as it does not satisfy every American. But it is the culmination of a series of mutual compromises and concessions, to which the Soviets contributed in substantial measure. The Soviet political consensus this reflects is a fact that must be weighed as the Senate now judges the treaty.

Ratification, of course, is a different subject in the two countries, but the review required for S

Soviet side if the treaty is not ratified and an obviously ailing President Brezhnev dies. The succession crisis then would seize the Soviet leadership. Previous successions suggest that this would produce an interim period of confusion and maneuvering, followed by the rise a few years later of a new leader and the possible adoption of new policies.

Failure of U.S. ratification thus could open a political interstice in which strategic weapons would be without agreed controls during a Soviet succession struggle. Wholly new policies and positions could be advocated by contenders for power and for support within the Soviet leadership. An agreement fully ratified before the passing of Brezhnev could, of course, be subject to actual if not legal repudiation by his successor, but that would be a much more difficult and dangerous defiance of American power than drastic proposals for Soviet "amendments" of a text still not formally adopted by the two governments.

American allies, the Soviet Union and its allies and the uncommitted nations closely observe the firmness and competence of the American management of the strategic arms relationship between the United States and the U.S.S.R. Brinksmanship and provocation would draw criticism, but indecision and weakness would create doubts. As concern has grown over American leadership in the fields of energy, international finance and assistance to embattled friends, so disarray and lack of an American consensus in the strategic nuclear field could cause qualms about basic alliance relationships and could bring about shifts in the center of political gravity from the United States toward the U.S.S.R.

As the debate moves to include these broad political dimensions beyond the details of SALT II, it should also stimulate consideration of the other problems America faces with respect to the Soviet Union. The [illegible] conventional-

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